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ABSTRACT

This fastback serves as a brief guide to several strategies for teaching literature in the high school English classroom, including sample assignments for advanced classes and for students with special interests. Techniques are presented for teaching literature using individual response, small-group work, and whole-class instruction. Teaching strategies presented in the fastback include the use of reading interest inventories, reading journals, small-group discussions of literature and book talks, and script writing. It is noted that these kinds of assignments lay the groundwork for helping young people to understand themselves as readers and to enjoy reading in the classroom. The fastback also points out that reader-response theory is consistent with a student-centered, whole language approach to teaching language arts. (RS)

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Reader-Response Approaches to Teaching Literature

Gwen McAlpine
Janice Warren

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Reader-Response Approaches to Teaching Literature

by
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and
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Table of Contents

Reader-Response Theory 7

Understanding Students' Reading Interests 10
Reading Interest Inventory 11

Gathering Responses to Reading 13
Journal Prompts 14

Using Small-Group Reading to Elicit Responses 17

Structuring Whole-Class Reading Activities 24
A Modified Cloze Procedure 26
Incorporating Related Works 29
Theme and Variations 32

Conclusion 36

Resources 38

Reader-Response Theory

This fastback is intended to serve as a brief guide to several strategies for teaching literature in the high school English classroom, including sample assignments for advanced classes and for students with special interests. We explain how to teach literature using individual response, small-group work, and whole-class instruction. The teaching strategies presented here include the use of reading interest inventories, reading journals, small-group discussions of literature and book talks, and script writing. These kinds of assignments lay the groundwork for helping young people to understand themselves as readers and to enjoy reading in the classroom. This approach is based on reader-response theory.

Reader-response theory is consistent with a student-centered, whole language approach to teaching language arts. The emphasis in reader-response theory is on readers' reactions to a literary selection. In general, English teachers use a reader-response approach to literature instruction in addition to an emphasis on textual analysis,

which also is prevalent in most high school literature classrooms.

Reader-response theory was most clearly articulated by Louise Rosenblatt in 1938 with the publication of her groundbreaking book, *Literature as Exploration.* In Rosenblatt's view, reader-response theory involves the text and the reader equally in a transaction in which the text acts as a stimulus for the reader's interpretation (Rosenblatt 1976, p. 11). Like those critics who promote extensive textual analysis, Rosenblatt also views the literary work as an art form; but she adds that the text offers the reader "a special kind of experience. [The literary work of art] is a mode of living. The poem, the play, the story is thus an. . . amplification, of life itself" (1976, p. 278). For Rosenblatt, reading is a lived experience as well as an aesthetic realization.

Writing for the literary community, Wilfred Guerin explains Rosenblatt's reading theory as a balancing act between the text and the reader. The reader is the most important element of the reading experience in reader-response theory. "In a sense, the reader creates the text as much as the author does," according to Guerin (1992, p. 334). However, Rosenblatt clearly indicates that the *text* is the basis — the blueprint, as she puts it — for students' responses (Rosenblatt 1978, p. 11).

It is important to note that a literature class run according to Rosenblatt's philosophy of reader-response theory does not permit an "anything goes" environment. As Robert Probst explains:

> None of Rosenblatt's principles eliminate careful, reasoned analysis in the study of literature, but they

> suggest that the basis for intelligent and productive reading is in the unique... connection between the reader and the text. (1984, p. 34)

Douglas and Dorothy Barnes also address the critics who characterize reader-response theory as a "touchy feely" process. They argue for the use of reader-response theory in every literature class, writing that "to deprive students of the opportunity of making the work their own — that is, of bringing their own experience to bear upon it — is to fail to teach them to read" (1990, p. 48). For engaging students' interest, for allowing young people to take pleasure in the reading experience, a responsive approach to literature is fundamental to their learning.

9

Understanding Students' Reading Interests

A large body of research seems to show a strong connection between students' interest in reading material and their understanding of it (Estes and Vaughan 1986, p. 150). Over the last two decades, the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress have shown that students who did the most reading tended to score highest on the reading portion of the national test (Cullinan et al. 1983, p. 29). Moreover, those students who read the largest amount of fiction, as well as those who read fiction and nonfiction at an equal rate, score the highest on the national reading test. Several reports indicate that assigning students to read high-interest materials often strengthens their rate of comprehension (Asher et al. 1978; Cullinan et al. 1983; Fader and McNeil 1968; White 1990).

The clear implication of this research is that classroom teachers need to offer their students shelves full of books — fiction *and* nonfiction. Following the maxim, "Start where they are," a good way to accumulate the "right"

books for a reading program is to begin by finding out about students' interests. To learn which books students prefer — and actually will read from cover to cover — the teacher can use a reading interest survey, or inventory, similar to the following example. This inventory combines the authors' ideas with several tips from the works of Robert Probst.

Reading Interest Inventory

1. What was the last great book that you read?
2. List five books or magazines that people your age like to read.
3. What characteristics do your favorite movies and favorite books have in common?
4. What makes a literary experience different from other experiences, such as watching television?
5. What kinds of books are frustrating to read?
6. What effect, if any, does a friend's recommendation of a book have on you?
7. Do you have a favorite genre that you usually read?
8. Does a book need to be memorable to be a good book?
9. What advice would you give to someone who hates to read?

This type of inventory can help English teachers accomplish two goals: 1) to gain a clearer understanding of their students' attitudes toward reading and 2) to select high-interest books for classroom libraries. Once teachers stock the classroom with students' favorite books, they then may assign students to read self-

selected materials for several minutes (at least 20 minutes) every week in class. Allowing students also to take materials home enhances the effectiveness of the program.

12

Gathering Responses to Reading

The next step is for the teacher to create a means of gathering detailed responses to the literature by assigning students to write in reading journals or logs. Questions such as those in the inventory can be used as the basis for responses in reading logs, which may include a history of students' reading experiences. The main point of assigning reading journals is to encourage students to find meaningful links between their own knowledge and experience and that of the world of the literary work.

Some structure for journal writing is necessary, especially with students writing in journals for the first time. Teachers may pose questions or have students write and answer their own questions. Another possibility is to tell students to "free write," or brainstorm, writing everything that occurs to them as they read the literary work (Quick 1988, p. 132).

Reading journals are personal; but they also may function as academic journals, which the English teacher monitors in some manner. This monitoring may entail

writing a few comments in response to a journal entry and then placing a check mark in the grade book to note that the student has done the assigned work. The teacher might request that students supply quotations or page references for the passages they write in their reading journals. Additionally, students may relate the book to other books or to nonprint media (Probst 1988, p. 36).

The following are questions, drawn from our experience and the work of Probst, that can serve as writing prompts and are designed to extend students' thinking on the substance of the literary work they are reading. These prompts are designed for short writing sessions. Students should consider the full range of their reading in answering these questions, including nonfiction, magazines and newspapers, even comic strips. Students should be instructed to include title and author information in their journal entries.

Journal Prompts

- What are your first impressions of this literary work?
- Copy sentences from your reading to use to begin your own stories or essays.
- Speculate about the events that occurred before or after the story begins.
- Finish this statement: If I were the main character, I would . . .
- Consider the ways in which the characters are similar to people that you know.

- Write five questions you would ask one of the characters if you could meet him or her. Please give the character's name.
- As a friend or counselor, give advice to one of the characters.
- What problems did the main characters have? How did they solve or cope with them?
- How did reading this book change your thinking?
- Make a drawing or map based on the literary selection.

After students are accustomed to using a journal, teachers may want to find new ways to gain information about their students' reading attitudes. One way is the three-column journal entry (Anderson et al. 1994). For this format, the journal page is divided into three columns, the first of which is used to record text information. This information may be in the form of a quotation, paraphrase, or summary of a passage, including a page reference. In the second column, the student responds to the passage in a manner of his or her choosing, for example, drawing an illustration, writing about feelings, or giving an opinion. In the third column, another classmate, a friend, or a family member writes a reaction to the first student's entries in columns one and two.

This journaling procedure gives the teacher a glimpse into students' questions or confusions about the piece of literature and the ideas that they bring to their reading. With this information, the teacher can develop questions that probe for understanding.

Teachers may require that students put all their entries together in a notebook or folder and that they put the date of the entry at the top. They may require that students write a minimum amount for each entry. Or teachers may ask students to write on a regular basis or for a prescribed length of time. Once journal writing engages students' interest, the teacher can easily loosen some of the rules and allow students to approach their journals in more individualistic ways.

The right approach for grading journals often is an issue. Journal responses are subjective; therefore, it is difficult to develop writing guidelines for assessing them. Many teachers simply give students credit for keeping journals without making the journal writing seem like a test and a burden. Probably the most important point is that the teacher does not mark off points for grammar in the journals. The primary goal of journaling is to encourage a free flow of ideas, not to evaluate a student's editing skill.

16

Using Small-Group Reading to Elicit Responses

Reading journal assignments also provide practical assistance to the English teacher because they create a database of students' opinions about reading. This information should provide the background information that the teacher needs in forming reading groups.

Our use of the term *reading group* refers to a group of three to five students, all reading the same literary selection. The selection should be one that they chose by a vote of all the group members. This literary selection usually will be a novel but may be a short story, a work of nonfiction, or even an article from a popular magazine. The group meets after all students have finished reading the selection. For a novel, the meeting time frame may extend over a period of three or four weeks. For a shorter selection, the time frame will naturally be shorter.

The English teacher can choose from several options for organizing reading groups, but students should have

enough latitude to hold a free-flowing discussion without much (or any) teacher intervention. The start-up procedure for reading groups is simple. While reading a book selected by the reading group, each member comments on the book in his or her reading journal. Group members also may react to each other's responses (for example, using the three-column format). However, students should be cautioned not to reveal plot details that are not yet known to other students.

Initially, the teacher may decide to organize reading groups according to students' preferences, as expressed in a reading interest inventory and in the reading journals. Organizing groups according to preferred genre or author is the simplest method and one that may work best when first forming such groups. After this initial organization, students themselves may want to choose their own organizing principle, for example, switching groups in order to read a National Book Award winner or regrouping according to some other method. Other organizing characteristics include: classic literature, modern writers, books made into movies, books recommended by a favorite author, and so on. Students can be asked to brainstorm ways to form groups and invariably will come up with creative suggestions.

Many libraries now carry videotaped interviews with writers, which may interest a reading group whose members are enamored of a particular writer or type of writing. For example, the 1992 California Newsreel production, *In Black and White: Conversations with African American Writers*, contains interviews with prominent writers, including Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison, Alice

Walker, John Wideman, August Wilson, and Charles Johnson. The interviews may spark new interests.

Once groups are formed and are functioning, the teacher should monitor the groups but exercise little direct control over them. The teacher may choose to act as a "participant observer" in the groups, as Langer describes it (1991, p. 50). This is a nonjudgmental role in which the teacher participates with the students, rather than directing or evaluating the group. When allowed to do so, the students in these groups learn for themselves how to negotiate major issues. Langer explains the advantages of the small-group discussion of literature:

> Students have an opportunity to take over the teacher's role as they interact with each other. During these small-group work sessions, they are encouraged to treat each other as thinkers, following the patterns of thought and interaction that have been previously demonstrated by the teacher. (1991, p. 50)

As the reading group strategy matures, students in these groups will determine for themselves which titles they will read, what they consider to be minimum preparation for a meeting (that is, the number of pages to read; whether they are to read reviews, criticism, or biographies; and so on), and the basic procedures for holding a conversation. A group may decide that it wants to hold an unstructured discussion. On the other hand, the group may vote to question each other, and they even may require members to write questions on the book in advance of the meeting. Regardless of the procedure they choose, this opportunity to have a group experi-

ence in reading ideally should provide a "direct personal entrance" into literary experience, according to the reading expert Louise Rosenblatt (1985, p. 77). This experience is encouraged when "the teacher does not impose an interpretation or a judgment," with "critical standards . . . collaboratively developed" by students (p. 77).

With experience, students involved in reading groups will challenge each other's interpretations and begin to "develop the habit of thinking rationally about things that engage their emotions," according to Rosenblatt. The most important benefit of holding a reading group is that it allows teenagers to talk to their peers in order to negotiate interpretations of literature they themselves have chosen. The teacher may monitor and assess reading groups in a variety of other ways: by becoming a member of a different group for each meeting, reading the book they selected and participating as a regular member, by conferring with reading group members privately, by having students write evaluations of the effectiveness of their group work, and by assigning groups to present book talks, which are explained in the next section.

Implementing a response-centered program of instruction requires the teacher to be organized and well-skilled. Careful planning and orchestration of duties and activities is necessary to prevent an "anything goes" atmosphere from arising. Indeed, such orchestration often is harder than it looks, requiring a "thorough knowledge of [the] subject and insight into the students," according to Probst (1984, p. 199).

Group discussion is noisy and can get out of hand if not well-planned. Therefore, advance organization is

especially important. To prepare students for working in reading groups, the teacher may distribute cards with brief descriptions of group work rules and individual duties. Students may be assigned — or asked to volunteer — to perform certain roles. Two valuable roles are those of *encourager*, a student who makes sure that every group member has a chance to talk, and *summarizer*, a different student who provides closure to the discussion. The summarizer also reminds members of their next group assignment.

Some classes will be mature enough for the teacher to assign the role of *group leader* to a student who reports to the teacher on the group's progress. Each teacher must decide whether to assign these roles (or others) to students or whether to allow group members to vote on which members will assume these roles. As Probst explains it, teachers using a reader-response approach do not have a "reassuring list of objectives or activities to follow" (1984, p. 199).

Often, even after creating an encourager role in a group, a few students will be persistently reticent. In that case, the teacher or group leader may require that group discussions begin with students reading aloud from their journals. This activity can serve as an ice-breaker for the reticent student.

The teacher can provide the groups with other approaches for drawing out responses. For example, one way to elicit a discussion or written response, suggested by Probst in a recent discussion, is to use a series continua. Example:

Liked the book - - - - - - - Disliked the book
Fast-paced book - - - - - - - Slow-paced book

This method is especially helpful for students who have strong opinions about a literary selection but can not explain their reasons for those opinions. By using such continua, the teacher or reading group members can ask probing questions to nudge students into articulating their opinions and ideas. Students might talk in their groups about their reasons for marking each continuum, or they might write an explanation in their journals.

Students who work with numbers more easily than with words may prefer to use rating scales, for example, rating a poem on a scale of 1 to 10 for selected characteristics, such as imagery or emotion. These "verbal scales," as they are called by Philip Anderson and Gregory Rubano (1991), also are designed to bring to the surface the feelings that students have been reluctant or find difficult to express.

In addition to using verbal scales, the teacher may ask other students to assist their reticent classmates in writing about their reading preferences. For example, the teacher might ask the entire class to interview one another in pairs. Or the students might be instructed to make anonymous lists. One technique is to have students write the following headings on three sheets of paper:

My Questions About the Book
Passages that Surprised Me
Passages that Bothered Me

22

When these sheets are circulated among students, the anonymous responses may point up simple misunderstandings about the names and relationships of characters or confusion about stylistic matters (for example, chapters written from the point of view of different characters). A few students may even advance an argument, for example, describing the ways in which the literary work read by their group is superior or inferior to others they have read from the same genre. The teacher can then use this information for class discussions or for the topic of short lectures.

Teachers can organize their literature instruction by leading off with group reading and then moving to a whole-class book in order to consider literary theories and figurative language with the entire class, drawing on the interest and insights students gained while discussing books in their groups. Having established reading groups, the teacher may ask them to continue to meet throughout the school year. Requiring both approaches — reading books in small groups and in a whole-class setting — gives the course variety and allows students to learn from people with diverse interests.

23

Structuring Whole-Class Reading Activities

One of the best books for high school teachers to use for whole-class instruction is Elie Wiesel's Night, a vivid, even heart-wrenching account of the Holocaust. In our experience, this book is nearly ideal as a starting point for whole-class reader-response activities, because it is relatively short — slightly more than 100 pages — and can be used in English, social studies, or interdisciplinary classes. We will use this book to illustrate how whole-class reading activities can be structured using reader-response theory.

To start, the following is Gwen McAlpine's personal response to the book. As the teacher, she models the response approach for students in her literature class.

Reading Wiesel's *Night*

Elie Wiesel's *Night* chronicles four years, 1941-45, when he was 12 to 16 years old, from the period prior to his internment in a concentration camp through his release from the camp. The 12-year-old Wiesel's devotion to religion was as

24

moving as the later circumstances of his denunciation of his faith. Beginning the book in this manner drew attention to the psychological devastation of the Holocaust. I was so deeply moved that I had to lay the book aside, especially when Wiesel wrote of his group of prisoners being marched toward a pit of burning bodies, only to be turned toward the barracks when they were two steps from the abyss. Wiesel described his memory of the scene in his simple, eloquent style:

> Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.
>
> Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. (1969, pp. 31-32)

In contrast to this child's bitterness, many of the adults maintained an extraordinary optimism. As the Nazis seized their property, moved them to camps, forced more labor on them, and provided little food, the camp prisoners continued to spread rumors that conditions were on the verge of improving. The child Elie did not seem to believe in these rumors. He reminded his father of a Jewish woman on the train to the camps who had seen a vision of a fire and had warned the Jews that they were headed toward their deaths.

It was this sickening sense of inevitability that became almost unbearable. The starving hurled themselves against electric fences; the old died during a forced march to a distant camp; and Wiesel's father died of dysentery as other sick inmates battered him. The suffering seemed meaningless, offering no conciliation, no passionate words about the getting of wisdom, no transformation among the Nazis, and no triumph for the Jews. Once released, the Jews were living skeletons who could not recognize themselves in the mirror.

They had been robbed of much more than physical well-being. The young man Elie had lost his sustaining faith, his home, and his family.

Given the terrible events of this book, Gwen found that it was impossible to overlook its potential effect on others. Her students also read *Night*. Almost as soon as the book was assigned, they began to complain about feeling compelled to stay up late to finish reading it. More precisely, they complained about having to stay up late to finish the book because they had to put it down so often to weep. One student in a remedial class wrote this entry in her reading journal, reproduced here verbatim:

The book *Night* was very moving, and it made your heart cry with pain. The acts against the Jewish people were brutal and uncalled-for. I was amazed that a person would put others in a fire and burn them alive. Feeling nothing for killing hundreds of people. The part in the book where the young boy is hung was the most uncalled-for act of brutal killings. Making the others watch.

The content of this student's entry is typical of students' reactions. *Night* is well-suited to response-centered activities. In fact, it would be unconscionable not to consider students' feelings when reading this powerful book.

A Modified Cloze Procedure

One method for inviting response to literature is to use a modified cloze procedure, which is a creative writing assignment using a sentence-completion activity. John Chapman (1983) explains that cloze offers students a chance to reconstruct a text's message, making the text

easier to read and giving students a sense of ownership in their reading. It also has the advantage of fostering predicting skills to strengthen reading ability (pp. 104-105). To use the cloze procedure with *Night*, for example, the teacher may want to encourage students to complete the following sentence in a way that fits the story and then go on to add sentences of their own to complete the feeling or impression.

Never shall I forget that _____. [from p. 32 of *Night*.]

The teacher may put several completed cloze statements on display as examples. Other students who need a prompt for writing in their reading journals may use these statements as models for their own first sentences. Another strategy is to ask students to complete the cloze statements in their reading journals and then to discuss them in groups and with the whole class.

At the end of their reading of *Night*, students might be asked to complete such sentences as the following:

All that is left is _____.

If Elie Wiesel's family had lived through World War II, they would have _____.

To complete the first sentence, most students will likely base their responses on the book. This first sentence can serve as a measure of students' familiarity with the text (see Estes and Vaughan 1986, p. 31). For the second response, students are forced to improvise and often do so in creative ways. Here is a sample response from a tenth-grade student to the second prompt:

They did live. They [the Wiesel family] lived in the Soviet Union. They were sent to northern Poland by mistake and, therefore, they were freed by Soviet troops. Elie met his future wife in a village just inside the border while the war was still on. Soon after meeting, these two moved further inside the huge country, fearing that the Germans might have triumphed over the Soviet forces. Both lived until January 1953 without hearing of their families. Starvation killed them when a snowdrift trapped them in their cabin. Elie had been a wood mason in a nearby village and his wife had been a housewife. They were buried together in the first thaw of 1953.

This response, however, leaves most of the questions about the Wiesels' future unanswered. For example, what befell the remainder of the Wiesel family? That omission provides an opportunity for more writing.

This activity also involves students in predicting outcomes, a useful reading strategy, according to Early and Ericson (1968, p. 37). Speculation about Wiesel's future may provoke discussion in the reading groups, which the teacher and students may satisfy by searching for information about Wiesel and the aftermath of the Holocaust.

Of course, prediction can — and should — be used before as well as during reading. And the teacher also can use the cloze procedure as a prereading activity to measure language development and reading ability. (See Estes and Vaughan 1986, pp. 30-32, for a thorough discussion of the usefulness of the cloze procedure as a measurement of reading ability.)

Whole-class discussion also can be stimulated by asking students to react to selected passages of text. For ex-

ample, the teacher might create enlarged reproductions of several passages from *Night*. These enlarged copies should have wide margins so that students can write their reactions next to specific words and phrases in the text. Moffett (1990, p. 311) makes this suggestion. In the case of *Night*, the ensuing class discussion often indicates to the teacher the amount of knowledge that students possess about Fascism. If that knowledge is incorrect or limited and this activity is undertaken early in the reading, then the teacher can correct any historical misunderstandings so that students can better understand the work as they continue to read on their own.

Incorporating Related Works

We have been surprised by how little our students know about the Holocaust. Excellent sources of additional information to use with *Night* include documentaries and photographs of Jewish life, such as those in the Holocaust Museum or in books. An example is *A Vanished World* by Roman Vishniac with an introduction by Elie Wiesel.

Time permitting, the class may read related works. One such work is William Heyen's poem, "The Children," which has a hopeful ending. (This poem has been printed in Heyen's book, *The Swastika Poems*, as well as in Edward Field's *A Geography of Poets*, 1979; see Resources.) The idea of intervening in a catastrophe often appeals to students, especially those who find *Night* too bleak. This poem can help students make inter-textual comparisons that build advanced reading skills. According to reports of the National Assessment of

Educational Progress made over the last two decades, most 17-year-olds lack these advanced skills.

As "The Children" may be a difficult poem for some high school students, the teacher may want to give students an anticipation guide as a prereading exercise. An anticipation guide reads like a survey and elicits students' opinions about a subject featured in the assigned literary selection. It may use a variety of response patterns: true-false, agree-no opinion-disagree, and so on.

The following is a sample, true-false anticipation guide for "The Children."

T F I rarely remember my dreams.
T F I often have vivid dreams.
T F Sometimes dreams contain warnings.
T F I do not take my dreams seriously.
T F Some writers get their best material from dreams.
T F Usually dreams show the dreamer's psychological state.
T F Dreams are best forgotten.

The responses to this anticipation guide can serve to lead the class into small-group discussions of responses. Each group, collectively, will write a vivid account of a dream as a next step. This dream account could be an amalgam of group members' individual dreams, one dream recounted by one member, or even a dream taken from literature (for example, one of the prophetic dreams found in the Bible). Next, each group reads its dream account aloud to the whole class, creating a prereading activity that will prepare students for the dream sequences in "The Children."

To link this activity more firmly to students' reading of *Night*, the teacher can ask that students speculate about the dreams that Wiesel and his family might have had while they were in captivity. The teacher might ask such questions as, Did they dream of being home, among the people that they loved and with their need for food and rest provided for? Did they dream of their captivity or of being liberated one day? The teacher should remind students that Wiesel did not tell his story until 10 years after his release and then ask the students to try to imagine the dreams that he might have had during those 10 years.

During this activity, the nightmarish quality of the Nazi regime may become apparent to students. This activity also allows students to connect their own dreams and nightmares to those of the Jews described in the book and the poem, creating a response-centered environment in the classroom. A few students may connect this activity with the passage in *Night* in which the Jewish woman hallucinated and saw a fire, which acted as an omen for the Jews' treatment in the camps.

After reading Heyen's poem, the class also might engage in one or two creative writing activities, such as a *directed reading and thinking* activity or a *dependent authorship* assignment. These assignments boost reading comprehension, especially in their close analysis of the text for diction and basic literary terms, such as characterization.

Directed reading and thinking activities also involve predicting. Easiest to perform with a poem, such an activity can be carried out by the teacher using an overhead projector to project the poem but revealing only

the title and first line. Then the teacher asks the students to write their predictions about the next line. The teacher follows this process until students have written a poem of their own and have seen each line of the original poem. As "The Children" is a long and sometimes difficult poem, the teacher may choose to use only one of the short, simpler stanzas for the directed reading and thinking activity. Ideally, this assignment should be quick and involve a poem (or excerpt) of no more than 15 lines.

Dependent authorship is a writing assignment based on a published work. This assignment requires students to take on the persona of the original author and then to write an additional episode for the published work or to change aspects of the story or poem as if they were the author revising a previous draft. Changes may include modifying characters, settings, or the plot. Personal writing may be added, such as an account of a dream (Adams 1987, p. 121).

Theme and Variations

The preceding sample reader-response lesson centers on the Holocaust theme and, in particular, on the Jewish experience. But those topics can be used as a launching point for related issues and literature. For example, the teacher might expand the focus from the Jewish experience to the experiences of other minority groups, such as African Americans or Native Americans. Interesting inter-textual comparisons can be made using poems or stories by such authors as Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker, Robert Hayden, and Alice Walker. Hayden's

poem, "Frederick Douglass," would make an excellent public speaking text, especially if accompanied by information on Douglass' life and work.

Indeed, the notion of theme and variations is a useful one for structuring group and whole-class reading experiences. One way to present a theme is to introduce the book talk as a method of evaluating progress in reading. Book talks are oral presentations for the class on one or more topics of interest from literary works that students have read. Book talks combine the strengths of the reader-centered and text-centered approaches to literature instruction. Nancie Atwell (1987) suggests holding book talks on several topics, for example, the writing style of the book, the author's life, characteristics of the literary genre, the reader's process in reading the book, the emotional responses stimulated by reading this book, the reader's own writing, a recommendation of the book, and the business of book publishing. A book talk might become a joint presentation by two students or a panel presentation, either of which might conclude with a whole-class discussion.

To return to our earlier discussion of groups, the topic for a book talk can be determined by the category of the group. For example, a group might be reading exclusively the works of Ann Rice and so could be interested in presenting talks on historical fiction, vampire lore, mass media versions of Rice's books or vampire legend in general, or the life of Rice. Of interest to many Rice fans is the quality of her books over time. Group members might discuss whether the quality of her books has improved or declined in recent years. Group members

might explain their criteria for judging quality and give examples from Rice's books.

Another author writing in the horror fiction genre who is popular with students is R.L. Stine, author of the "Goosebumps" series popular with elementary children and the "Fear Street" series for young adults. In a book talk about Stine's work, high school students might discuss why they liked his books as children and why the more sophisticated young adult horror novels appeal to them now. Another interesting angle would be to examine the publishing phenomenon of Stine, with his books taking whole shelves in book stores. Does Stine actually write all these books himself? What does he say in interviews about his writing and publishing? What does his publisher report about him? The Stine reading group also might try to find out which authors Stine likes to read for pleasure and then consider reading these books in their group.

Students might want to examine plot structure in a series of books by the same author to determine whether the author uses a formula plot and stock set of characters. Stine's formula plot may already be apparent for students if they have seen some of the televised versions of his stories. Students might delve into this topic for other horror writers, such as Stephen King, or for other series writers, such as the authors of the Baby-Sitters Club series and Sweet Valley High/Sweet Valley University books. These horror and romance genres may be especially attractive to less-able readers because many of the books are fast-paced and simply structured.

Advanced readers might choose to give book talks on modern "classics." For example, a theme might be American expatriate writers in the Paris of the 1920s and include works by Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. The reading group might consider these writers' lives and display photographs of them, discuss the writers and their associates (such as the artist Picasso), and so on.

Students might compare the romanticism of Fitzgerald and the stylized realism of Hemingway. Those interested in the business of publishing might begin by researching Hemingway's anecdotes in *A Moveable Feast* and in journalistic accounts of the publishing success and fame of the expatriates. Reading the books and reviews could take a reading group an entire school year. The study of the expatriates might culminate with an extended assignment in which students define their own standards for judging great literature and display their conclusions in essays and book talks.

35

Conclusion

The activities suggested in this fastback incorporate the most effective elements of the response-centered model and a literary analysis model. Students' responses are inhibited only by the bounds of their imaginations and by the text, which acts as a blueprint for their writing and presentations (Rosenblatt 1978, p. 11). These response-centered teaching strategies meet the criteria for literature instruction developed by Rosenblatt and described by Probst (1986):

Students must be free to deal with their own reactions. This is the philosophy behind the reading group discussions and reading journals suggested in this fastback. Most important is the idea that students express their emotional responses to the reading experience. Especially in a class that features literary analysis, teachers should encourage students to talk and to write about their emotional responses to literature, including their negative reactions.

There must be an opportunity for an "initial crystallization of a personal sense of the work" (Probst 1986, p. 62). In the classroom, this opportunity occurs when students choose their own books to read, read them silently in

36

class and at home, and respond to them in their journals — before joining their group for discussion.

Teachers should attempt to find points of contact among the opinions of students. The teacher facilitates class discussion by modeling a reading process, holding reading groups and book talks, and assigning group writing activities.

The teacher's influence should be "an elaboration of the vital influence inherent in literature itself" (Probst 1986, p. 62). The teaching strategies in this fastback provide for an integration of reading and writing assignments through a series of related activities: reading journals, book talks, an expansion of the usual range of essays to include more creative writing assignments, and directed reading and thinking activities.

It also is important to note that students cannot create meaningful responses to literary works until they comprehend them. Therefore, the English teacher is obligated to give a great deal of attention to the selection of high-quality classroom texts and to the development of strategies to strengthen students' understanding of these texts. Literary analysis needs to occur without stifling students' natural responses to the reading experience.

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